The Importance of Business Travel Innovation - By Greg Abbott, SVP, DataArt, Travel and Hospitality Practice

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- DataArt

I recently had the pleasure of sitting on a panel with prestigious business travel leaders to discuss the major issues facing the sector. One of the overarching sentiments emerging from the event was the fact that we are entering a period of significant evolution for the business travel sector, with technology moving at an increasingly rapid pace. Although the business travel industry has previously lagged behind other travel sectors regarding traveler focused innovations, the largest Travel Management Companies seemed poised to "take back" ownership of their technical destiny. This is a significant step considering most of the technology in these companies is served by GDS' and products from pure tech companies like Concur, Deem, etc.

The panel featured many industry experts, including Evan Konwiser, Vice President Digital Traveller, American Express Global Business Travel; Miriam Moscovici, Director, Emerging Technologies, BCD Travel; Mat Orrego, Co-Founder and CEO, Cornerstone Information Systems and Chip Coyle, Senior Vice President and CMO, Infor. The audience was comprised of delegates from a range of business travel providers and stakeholders, including Phocuswright, Dropbox, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, UBS, the Barbados Tourism Authority and Nasdaq.

The Evolution of AI and Bots

While the robotics or bots aren't new to the business travel industry, the concept of using artificial intelligence (AI) and bots automation is entering a higher level of sophistication than has existed in the past. The current surge in the development of bots is related to the growing popularity of message-based communication, such as Facebook Messenger. Today's AI is technology that attempts to emulate the manner in which a human brain works, and it has already become a standard component in our lives, with personal assistants such as Apple's Siri, Amazon's Echo, and Microsoft's Cortana built into mobile and home devices. The recent rise of AI technology in the business travel industry is due in large part to the advancing technology and growing consumer acceptance of automated services.

There are several companies in the travel industry that are employing AI to augment services provided by human agents, such as Lola and Pana. One of the key drivers for using this technology is cost-savings, with AI attempting to answer customer queries first, thereby allowing companies to reserve their human assets for the highest value work. While many believe that AI is not yet at the point where it can entirely replace human interaction, other companies are already going completely virtual with their efforts. HelloGbye provides one of these services, which allows consumers to message travel plans via a chat interface and creates an itinerary for up to nine people in an initial search, with no human agents being used to fulfill requests.

As AI continues to evolve, experts predict it will bring an increased level of personalization to the business travel industry while simultaneously reducing selling time and providing significant cost-savings.

Alternative Lodging Challenges

Business travel is directly connected to negotiated rates with airlines, hotels, and other travel products. However, the industry is now faced with the challenges of travelers staying at alternative places, such as Airbnb. Although alternative lodging options may not exist in the current ecosystem of many business travel providers, it's becoming increasingly important to understand how to include these products. To retain

control, some travel companies are now integrating Airbnb's data into their own proprietary systems, thereby bringing alternative lodging bookings into view for managed business travel in order to adapt to the evolving landscape.

Moving Beyond "Digital Duct Tape"

Unfortunately, the business travel industry is still in a phase of using "digital duct tape". As Miriam Moscovici, Director of Emerging Technologies at BCD Travel, noted during the panel, companies are continuing to use the GDS PNR as a CRM, and taking an Airbnb address and pushing it into the GDS. In the past, many tech providers kept technology in place until it was broken, instead of embracing and developing new methods of delivery and process. Certainly, one of the challenges preventing innovation is the infrastructure and technology expenses, which may not always present significantly increased value to customers.

At the same time, as the industry and consumer expectations evolve, it's essential for companies to make traveler-centric changes. Experts agree that travel companies used to be primarily concerned with keeping complaints to a minimum, while the industry is now rapidly shifting to focus much more on the customer. Although the client often used to be one CFO, the modern business traveler is now influencing the travel industry, making it increasingly important for companies to use machine learning, natural language processing (NLP) and AI to meet the evolving expectations of business travelers.

Innovation Leads to Success

Overall, the event solidified the belief that the business travel industry must focus on innovation to succeed. As technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, our industry must embrace the changes by developing innovative utilizations of these advancements to lead the tech revolution into the future.

What is going to be the next big thing in business travel technology? Let me know by reaching out to me on Twitter @jgabbott or LinkedIn.

About Greg Abbott

Greg Abbott is a Partner at DataArt, leading the Travel & Hospitality Practice, which he formed in 2010. Greg has deep experience in executive sales & travel system operations, with 20+ years in domestic and international online travel industry sector, including entrepreneurship, management, product development, and consulting. His career in travel began in the early '90's while attending the University of California at Berkeley and working at the corporate campus travel agency that was later acquired by STA Travel.

Over his decade with STA Travel, Greg rose to the Director position and later departed to join NEXGEN Travel in Munich, Germany's leading online travel startup, assuming the role of Product Director for nearly four years. While at NEXGEN, his team tackled some of the most unique system and technology challenges in the hospitality & tour operator distribution landscape. On his return to the U.S., Greg joined DataArt as SVP of Travel & Hospitality to lead the charge in building out DataArt's service to leading travel technology companies around the globe. He is a frequent speaker and a thought leader, with a loyal following in the press and social media alike. @jgabbott

About DataArt:

DataArt is a technology consulting firm that creates end-to-end solutions, from concept and strategy, to design, implementation and support, helping global clients in the financial services, healthcare, hospitality, media and IoT sectors achieve important business outcomes. Rooted in deep domain knowledge and technology expertise, DataArt designs new products, modernizes enterprise systems and provides managed services delivered by outstanding development teams in the U.S., UK, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. As a recognized leader in business and technology services, DataArt has earned the trust of some of the world's leading brands and most discerning clients, including McGraw-Hill Financial, Coller Capital, BankingUp, Ocado, artnet, Betfair, Skyscanner, Collette Vacations, Booker and Charles River Laboratories. @DataArt

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